CHILD-MOTHER ATTACHMENT AND PARENTAL RELATIONSHIP STABILITY IN FAMILIES EXPERIENCING INTERPARENTAL VIOLENCE

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CHILD-MOTHER ATTACHMENT AND PARENTAL RELATIONSHIP STABILITY IN FAMILIES EXPERIENCING INTERPARENTAL VIOLENCE (80 pp.)

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Grounded in family systems and attachment theories, the purpose of this study was to explore the associations between the associations between interparental violence (IPV), child-mother attachment and parental relationship stability. A casual-comparative design addressed the following research questions: a) what is the association between interparental violence and child-mother attachment for preschool children? b) does child-mother attachment predict parental relationship stability? and c) does interparental violence predict parental relationship stability? Utilizing 1,237 maternal self-reports from a large, nationally representative dataset, this sample reported generally low levels of IPV, high frequencies of secure child-mother attachment, and parental relationships which were primarily maintained over two-years. Analyses revealed that the association between IPV and attachment for the current sample is not statistically significant. However, psychological and physical IPV pointed to an increased likelihood of insecure child-mother attachment, whereas sexual IPV pointed towards an increased likelihood of secure child-mother attachment. Data also revealed that IPV is a significantly stronger predictor of parental relationship status than child-mother attachment. Implications and future directions are discussed.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Intimate partner violence is a widespread problem in the United States. Defined by the Intimate Partner Violence Surveillance: Uniform Definitions and Recommendations Data Elements guide put forth by the Center for Disease Control, intimate partner violence (IPV) “includes physical violence, sexual violence, stalking and psychological aggression (including coercive tactics) by a current or former intimate partner (i.e., spouse, boyfriend/girlfriend, dating partner, or ongoing sexual partner”) (Breiding, Basile, Smith, Black, & Mahendra, 2015, p. 11). National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS), an ongoing nationally representative measure capturing the incidence and prevalence rates of violent victimization, reveals that 32.4% of U.S. women have experienced physical violence by an intimate partner, a figure representing over 39 million U.S. women (Smith et al., 2017). Sexual violence has been experienced by 16.4% of female responders and nearly half of U.S. women (47.1%) have experienced psychological aggression from an intimate partner, an alarming figure representing over 56 million U.S. women. Though data indicate that both men and women are subject to IPV, evidence suggests that a greater level of negative impact is experienced by female victims (Breiding et al., 2014). Further, as males are the primary perpetrators of IPV across measurement instruments (Hamby, 2014), it is critical to pay particular attention to the implications of female victimization.
Though the lived experiences and implications of IPV directly faced by female victims are the core of much empirical and intervention efforts, attention has also focused on children’s experiences of growing up in homes plagued by violence. McDonald, Jouriles, Ramisetty-Mikler, and Caetana (2006) estimate 15.5 million U.S. children live in homes plagued by intimate partner violence. The National Survey of Children’s Exposure to Violence (NatScev), a large, nationally representative examination of violence exposure among American youth, indicates that 1 out of every 15 children are exposed to interparental IPV annually, and that fathers are the primary perpetrators within these familial systems (Hamby, Finkelhor, Turner, & Ormrod, 2011). Embedded within a family systems theory approach, recognizing the reciprocal interrelatedness of familial subsystems and processes (Cox & Paley, 1997), a robust body of literature has investigated the impact of father-to-mother IPV on family functioning. Much of this work has been aimed at highlighting the negative consequences for children’s development (e.g., Kitzmann, Gaylord, Holt, & Kenny, 2003; The HealthPath Foundation of Ohio, 2017) and implications for mother-child relationship quality (Buchanan, Power, & Verity, 2013; Margolin, Gordis, & Oliver, 2004; Nicklas & Mackenize, 2013).

Attachment security is often considered the classic measure of mother-child relationship quality (Greenberg, Cicchetti, & Cummings, 1990). Work by Ainsworth and colleagues (1978) indicates that consistent patterns of high maternal responsiveness (i.e., proximity promoting behavior, accessibility, warmth) translates into children forming an attachment bond based upon trust and a sense of safety. These children typically fall
under the classification of secure attachment. In contrast, low maternal responsiveness (i.e., inconsistent patterns of proximity promoting behavior, inaccessibility, coldness) is associated with children’s formation of insecure attachment. The development of insecure attachment is particularly prominent in high conflict homes (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Greenberg et al., 1990; Sigleman & Rider, 2015) where children can experience fear and a lack of security from both environmental and familial relationships (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970).

With evidence suggesting that caregiving quality and responsiveness is hindered in the face of maternal experiences of IPV, Levendosky, Bogart, Huth-Bocks, Rosenblum, and von Eye (2011b) assert that IPV is an “assault on the caregiving system” (p. 516). Though an emergent line of research points to the disruption of mother-child relationship quality, particularly indicating that patterns of inhibited maternal caregiving cartwheel into diminished child-mother attachment security (Levendosky, Bogat, & Huth-Bocks, 2011a; Levendosky et al., 2001b; Zeanah, Danis, Hirshberg, Benoit, & Heller, 1999), a smaller, yet compelling, pool of evidence suggests the potential for stronger mother-child relationships in the face of interparental violence (Levendosky, Huth-Bocks, Shapiro, & Semel, 2003; Levendosky, Lynch, & Graham-Bermann, 2000). Earlier work by Levendosky and colleagues (2000; 2003) suggests that severe IPV drives some mothers to compensate for the violence exposure by deliberately increasing responsiveness to their children, thus increasing patterns of secure attachment. Additionally, Greenberg, Cicchetti, and Cummings (1990) point out that in the context of very high interparental conflict, the mother-child relationship may be the only close
relationship a mother has, potentially leading to stronger child-mother attachment. While these claims contradict the growing consensus that IPV disrupts parenting quality and damages attachment security, this provocative line of evidence highlights the need for further empirical efforts aimed at untangling the relationships between interparental violence and mother-child dyads. Furthermore, there is some claim that the preschool years serve as a “critical period” in the long-term consequence of interparental violence exposure (Holmes, 2013). Therefore, it is especially imperative to further clarify the association between father-to-mother violence and mother-child attachment security when children are below age six.

Just as evidence indicates that violence within the father-mother dyad has implications for the mother-child relationship, a family systems perspective suggests reciprocity in that mother-child dyads also have implications for the mother-father relationship (Cox & Paley, 1997; Erel & Burman, 1995; Fincham, 1998). This reciprocity is partly evident when exploring maternal decisions to maintain or dissolve a relationship with their abusive partner. Though victims’ stay/leave decisions are made on a wide variety of complex variables (e.g., violence severity, safety concerns, financial stability, relationship commitment) (McDonough, 2010; Rusbult & Martz, 1995; Thomas, Goodman, & Putnins, 2015), the role children play in that decision-making process adds a unique additional layer of considerations for mothers. As attention to the developmental and safety needs of their children, coupled with an awareness of the impact abuse has on their parenting practices, can be a driving force behind the decision to leave or maintain an abusive relationship (Meyer, 2011; Moe, 2009), it is compelling
that these mother-child relationships can both encourage and deter parental relationship stability and dissolution (Meyer, 2011; Rhodes, Cerulli, Dichter, Kothari, & Barg, 2010; Vatnar & Bjorkly, 2010). However, considerations through the lens of mother-child attachment security have yet to be explored. The current research aims to fill this gap in the literature by establishing a more comprehensive conceptualization of the reciprocal nature of mother-child and mother-father relationships in the context of violence plagued homes.

**Statement of the Purpose**

This research is grounded in both family systems theory and attachment theory by recognizing the interdependence among familial subsystems (Erel & Burman, 1995; Fincham, 1998) and the significance of early mother-child attachment for developmental trajectories across the lifespan (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Rossman, 2001; Sigleman & Rider, 2015). To address the gap in knowledge about the reciprocal nature of the mother-child and mother-father systems, the current study will explore the relationships between interparental violence, child-mother attachment and parental relationship stability.

**Definition of Terms**

The current study draws on data provided by the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS). A large, nationally representative study employing an ongoing, longitudinal design to follow a cohort of nearly 5,000 children and their parents across six waves of data collection, FFCWS targeted primarily unmarried parents at the time of the focal child’s birth, thus coining the term “fragile family” (Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 2001). Measuring a wide range of variables relating to
individual and familial functioning, and the inclusion of multiple data collection methods (surveys, in-home observations, etc.) over the span of 15 years, the secondary analysis of FFCWS data is ideal for considering the interrelatedness of interparental violence, child-mother attachment and parental relationship stability. The definitions of each construct can be found in Table 1.

Table 1.

*Summary of Theoretical and Empirical Constructs*

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<th>Theoretical Construct</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conceptual Definition</td>
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<td>Interparental violence</td>
<td>Degree of father-to-mother violence</td>
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<td>Child-mother attachment</td>
<td>Security of child-mother attachment</td>
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<td>Parental relationship stability</td>
<td>Stability or dissolution of father-mother romantic relationship over 2 years</td>
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Research Questions and Hypotheses

The following research questions and hypotheses guided this investigation:

Research Question 1: What is the association between interparental violence and child-mother attachment security?

• H1: Maternal reports of father-to-mother violence will be significantly related to maternal reports of child-mother insecure attachment.

Research Question 2: Does child-mother attachment predict parental relationship stability?

• H2: Maternal reports of secure child-mother attachment at year three will be predictive of maternal reports of stable mother-father romantic relationships at year five.

Research Question 3: Is the association between child-mother attachment and parental relationship stability stronger than the association between interparental violence and parental relationship stability?

• H3: The association between interparental violence and relationship stability will be stronger than the association between attachment and relationship stability. Maternal reports of father-to-mother interparental violence at year three will be predictive of dissolved mother-father romantic relationships at year five.
Figure 1. Summary of Hypothesized Relationships between Research Constructs
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Grounded in both family systems theory and attachment theory, the current review of literature aims to explore the complex interplay between interparental violence, child-mother attachment, and parental relationship stability. Indications that father-to-mother interparental violence influences young children’s functioning and maternal caregiving practices, thus shaping child-mother attachment, will be presented. Highlighting the reciprocal nature of familial systems, evidence suggesting child-mother attachment may contribute to parental relationship trajectories will also be discussed. In an effort to disentangle the circular nature of family processes in violent homes, this review of literature will conclude by addressing the need for empirical exploration of the ramifications interparental violence yields for child-mother attachment, as well as the role child-mother attachment plays in parental relationship stability.

Intimate Partner Violence

The Intimate Partner Violence Surveillance: Uniform Definitions and Recommendations Data Elements Guide, utilizing a comprehensive definitional framework declares that intimate partner violence (IPV) “includes physical violence, sexual violence, stalking and psychological aggression (including coercive tactics) by a current or former intimate partner (i.e., spouse, boyfriend/girlfriend, dating partner, or ongoing sexual partner”) (Breiding, Basile, Smith, Black, & Mahendra, 2015, p. 11). The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS), an ongoing nationally representative measure capturing the incidence and prevalence rates of violent
victimization, reveals that intimate partner violence (IPV) is a widespread problem in the United States (Smith et al., 2017). Measuring a range of violent behaviors (e.g., being slapped, pushed or shoved) and severe violent behaviors (e.g., being punched, kicked, choked/suffocated, beaten, burned on purpose, or the use of weapons), the most recent analysis of NISVS data reveals 32.4% of U.S. women have experienced physical violence by an intimate partner during her lifetime. This figure represents over 39 million U.S. women. Sexual violence by an intimate partner, including behaviors such as rape, sexual coercion, and/or unwanted sexual contact, had been experienced by 16.4% of female responders, which extrapolates to over 19 million women in the U.S.

Though much attention has been paid to physical and sexual violence historically, due to the immediate, visible consequences of these forms of victimization, contemporary research reveals that psychological aggression is equally, if not more, damaging to a victim (Breiding et al., 2014). Conceptualizing psychological aggression in terms of expressive aggression, including name-calling, insulting or humiliating, and coercive control, or tactics that are used to “monitor, control, or threaten an intimate partner” (Smith et al., 2017, p. 117), NISVS data reveal that nearly half of U.S. women (47.1%) have experienced psychological aggression from an intimate partner during her lifetime. This alarming figure represents over 56 million U.S. women.

Women are not alone in these experiences. In fact, data reveal that men and women report somewhat comparable rates of IPV victimization (Breiding et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2017). Specifically focusing on the most recent analysis of NISVS data, 28.3% of men reported experiences of physical violence by an intimate partner, with
nearly 1 in 7 disclosing severe physical violence (Smith et al., 2017). When considering psychological aggression, 47.3% of men had been psychologically victimized by an intimate partner, a rate just slightly higher than that of women respondents.

Though data clearly indicate that both men and women are subject to IPV, earlier analysis of NISVS data conducted by Breiding and team (2014) suggests that female victims experience greater negative impact. Specifically, women are more likely to sustain physical injury resulting from a violent incident, report feelings of fear and concern for their safety, and experience symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Breiding et al., 2014). Nearly one third of female victims report IPV negatively affecting their lives, compared to only 11% of men (Smith et al., 2017), suggesting that the overall burden of victimization is significantly heavier for female victims. Further, males are the primary perpetrators of violence across measurement instruments (Hamby, 2014). As such, Barnett, Miller-Perrin, and Perrin (2011) argue that researchers must look deeper than static incidence and prevalence rates, and take into consideration the lived experiences associated with IPV, with critical attention on the ramifications of male-to-female intimate partner violence. Thus, grounded in both family systems theory and attachment theory, the present study will focus on the implications of male-to-female intimate partner violence.

Interparental Violence

Family Systems Theory

Family systems theory focuses on the interrelatedness of family dynamics and processes by recognizing the reciprocal nature of all familial interactions. Rather than
adopting an intrapsychic perspective, where an individual family member is the focus of study and/or intervention, this interpersonal perspective considers the reciprocal nature of behaviors, emotions, and interactions of the entire family unit (Smith & Hamon, 2012). The family unit as a whole is viewed as one system, relying on internal subsystems in order to maintain healthy functioning (Bornstein & Sawyer, 2006; Smith & Hamon, 2012). Though individual and dyadic relationships have been the primary focus of research efforts historically (Broderick, 1993), contemporary family system perspectives take a more holistic approach by recognizing the integration of a wider range of subsystems, including: 1) characteristics of individual family members, 2) the parental relationship, 3) parent-child relationships, 4) sibling relationships, 5) extra-familial relationships, and 6) ecological factors outside of the family (Bornstein & Sawyer, 2006).

Family systems theory posits that any interaction within or across subsystems has ramifications for other subsystems in the family, ultimately shaping the functioning of the entire unit (Cox & Paley, 1997). That is, family functioning as a whole is a product of the interactions and behaviors within and between the relational subsystems comprising the family (Bornstein & Sawyer, 2006). From this perspective, families are viewed as an open social system, with information flowing back and forth between members, and resulting in the continual adaptation to changes and fluctuation in behavior within each subsystem (Broderick, 1993).

From a family systems perspective, not only is it imperative for researchers to consider the theoretical underpinnings and direct implications of male-to-female violence, but it is also especially critical to explore these facets in relation to family life.
Utilizing data from substantiated cases of domestic violence, Fantuzzo and Fucso (2007) reveal that couples experiencing IPV are more likely to have children living in the household than to be childless. This suggests that not only do a high proportion of U.S. women experience interpersonal violence and its destructive aftermath (Breiding et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2017), but that many of these women are embedded within a family system as mothers. Further, through analysis of a large, nationally representative examination of violence exposure among American youth, Hamby, Finkelhor, Turner, and Ormrod (2011) identify fathers as the primary perpetrators of IPV within these familial systems. Therefore, specific incidences and consequences of father-to-mother violence must be recognized. From a family systems perspective, discussing violence between parents simply in terms of “intimate partner violence” theoretically implies this violence generates implications only for the mother-father dyad, thus covertly disregarding its influence on children in the family system (Eisikovits & Winstok, 2001). As such, framing violence between parents as “interparental violence” in the present study deliberately accounts for children in the family system and recognizes that violent interactions have implications beyond the parental dyad.

**Interparental Violence and Children**

The association between functioning within the parental system and child development is well established in the scientific literature (Cox & Paley, 1997; Erel & Burman, 1995; Fincham, 1998). Fincham (1998) asserts that child development cannot be fully understood by considering the child alone or through the parent-child relationship, as the dyadic parental relationship holds substantial influence over the
developing child. Children living in a home characterized by healthy parental relationships and family functioning are more likely to develop normative cognitive processes, display behavioral regulation and possess adaptive socioemotional strategies (Rossman, 2001), whereas homes characterized by parental conflict are associated with negative child outcomes such as aggression and anxiety (DeVoe & Smith, 2002; Fincham, 1998). Children’s susceptibility to both direct and indirect parental influence highlights the power parental relationships have on children’s functioning (Bornsein & Sawyer, 2006).

McDonald, Jouriles, Ramisettty-Mikler, and Caetana (2006) estimate 15.5 million U.S. children live in homes plagued by intimate partner violence. The National Survey of Children’s Exposure to Violence (NatScev), a large, nationally representative study surveying violence exposure among American youth, indicates that 1 out of every 15 children are exposed to interparental violence annually (Hamby et al., 2011). Combined, these studies suggest that children’s exposure to interparental violence is widespread, and the consequences of maternal victimization extend to children in these family systems (Jouriles, McDonald, Norwood, & Ezell, 2001). Thus, recognizing the interdependence of familial systems, and the robust body of evidence highlighting the influence parental relationships have on child development (Cox & Paley, 1997; Erel & Burman, 1995; Fincham, 1998), it is imperative to look at interparental violence through the lens of family systems theory by considering its ramifications for children.

Much work has been aimed at highlighting the negative consequences of both direct and indirect exposure to interparental violence on the development of children
(e.g., Kitzmann, Gaylord, Holt, & Kenny, 2003; The HealthPath Foundation of Ohio, 2017). Systematic reviews indicate that violence exposure leaves children at risk for a wide range of negative consequences, including behavioral problems, decreased cognitive ability, poorer physical health, psychological distress, and impaired psychological functioning (Kitzmann et al., 2003; The HealthPath Foundation, 2017). A meta-analytical review comparing exposed versus non-exposed children conducted by Kitzmann and team (2003) posits that interparental violence leads to more disruption in children’s functioning than other forms of conflict. This review declares that 67% of exposed children have poorer outcomes than those who were not exposed.

While the complexity of examining the effects of exposure is heightened by children’s developmental levels and appraisal of the violence, Jouriles, McDonald, Norwood, and Ezell (2001) suggest that much of the challenge lays in untangling the kind of exposure to which the child has been subjected. Jourlies et al. (2001) recognized that broad, comprehensive frameworks of violence and children’s exposure improves researchers’ ability to delineate the pathways between violence, exposure, and child outcomes. Holden (2003) states that direct exposure, such observing/overhearing incidences of violence or attempting to intervene, is generally thought to be the most distressing to children, therefore the most concerning to researchers and clinicians. However, the significance of indirect exposure, such as seeing injuries sustained from violence or simply living in a home where violence occurs, must also be recognized. Holden (2003) asserts that both direct and indirect exposure have the ability to undermine a child’s sense of security or yield changes in life circumstances (i.e., impact on parental
caregiving, create housing instability). The current understanding is that a child does not need to face direct exposure to be impacted by it (Holden, 2003; Jouriles et al., 2001).

**Inteparental Violence Exposure during the Preschool Years.** Fantuzzo and Fucso (2007) reveal that children under 6 years old are disproportionately exposed to interparental violence. Though children of all ages are susceptible to negative consequences from interparental violence (The HealthPath Foundation, 2017), the high rate of exposure during this period elevates the concern specifically for preschool aged children. As the sophistication of preschoolers’ repertoire of socioemotional understanding evolves, demonstrated by their ability to experience a more complex set of feelings and better interpret and adapt to the emotions of those around them (Thompson & Lagattuta, 2006), these enormous changes leave young children especially sensitive to the influence of parental relationships. Recognizing the still limited cognitive capacity to understand and cope with conflict during early childhood, Kitzmann and colleagues (2003) identify preschool children as having an increased risk for developing adjustment problems in the face of interparental violence exposure. An association between interparental violence exposure during the preschool years and impaired functioning is consistent within the literature, particularly revealing high levels of anxiety and depression (The HealthPath Foundation, 2017), social withdrawal (DeVoe & Smith, 2002), and displays of trauma symptoms (Levendosky, Huth-Bocks, Semel, & Shapiro, 2002; Zerk, Mertin, & Proeve, 2009).

Some claim that exposure during early childhood is especially concerning due to the impact early development has on subsequent functioning. A critical review of
literature exploring interparental violence and children’s long-term functioning indicates that immediate displays of maladaptive behavior can inhibit normative developmental accomplishments (Rossman, 2001). Rossman (2001) declares that this early disruption may cascade into long-term patterns of behavioral and socioemotional dysfunction. Parallel to this claim, Holmes (2013) provides evidence for a potential “sleeper effect,” suggesting that some preschool children exposed to interparental violence may not display adjustment problems until later in their development. Longitudinal data following the behavioral trajectories in exposed versus non-exposed young children indicate that more frequent early exposure did not reveal immediate differences between groups. However, increased aggression emerged in exposed children later in their development. Thus, Holmes declares that the preschool years may serve as a “critical period” in the long-term impact violence exposure has on functioning. Given the pool of evidence highlighting both short and long-term consequences, not only is exposure to violence related to immediate developmental disruptions (e.g., The HealthPath Foundation, 2017), it also has the potential to solidify into maladaptive functioning throughout the lifespan (Holmes, 2013; Rossman, 2001). Considering the reciprocal nature of familial subsystems (Cox & Paley, 1997), interparental violence may also reach children through its impact on the mother-child relationship.

**Interparental Violence and Mother-Child Relationships**

Family systems theory recognizes the power family climate has over dyadic interactions (Bornstein & Sawyer, 2006), particularly emphasizing the links between parental and parent-child relationships (Cox & Paley, 1997; Erel & Burman, 1995;
Fincham, 1998). Erel and Burman (1995) describe two diverging theories permeating the literature on the interrelatedness of parental relationship and parent-child relationships: the spillover hypothesis and the compensatory hypothesis. The spillover hypothesis posits that conflict within the mother-father relationship “spills over” to create conflict within the mother-child relationship, whereas the compensatory model challenges this notion by suggesting mother-father conflict can motivate deliberate compensation efforts within the mother-child system. Through meta-analysis, Erel and Burman (1995) provide support for the spillover hypothesis, asserting that healthy parent-child relationships are difficult to foster in the face of parental conflict.

Though attention to mothering in the context of interparental violence had been limited historically (Radford & Hester, 2001), a growing line of research has expanded to consider the direct ramifications partner abuse has on mothers and its indirect influence on maternal caregiving. In discussion of the links between mothering and IPV, Radford and Hester (2001) detail two conceptualizations of abused mothers: 1) mothers as victims who suffer from a host of negative intrapersonal challenges, thus exhibiting deficits in maternal caregiving, and 2) mothers as “rebels against victimism” who maintain personal agency and quality caregiving despite the abuse (p. 143). Though stemming from differing frameworks, these themes mirror the trends highlighted by Erel and Burman (1995). As abused mothers’ challenges have garnered the most empirical attention, thus supporting the spillover hypothesis, Radford and Hester (2001) claim that further attention must be paid to their resiliency and compensatory efforts. Maternal caregiving
characterized by either spillover or compensatory efforts may create implications for the mother-child relationship.

**Interparental Violence and Child-Mother Attachment.** Attachment security is often considered the classic measure of mother-child relationship quality (Greenberg, Cicchetti, & Cummings, 1990). Work by Ainsworth and colleagues (1978) indicates that consistent patterns of high maternal responsiveness (i.e., proximity promoting behavior, accessibility, warmth) translates into children forming an attachment bond based upon trust and a sense of safety. These children typically fall under the classification of secure attachment. In contrast, low maternal responsiveness (i.e., inconsistent patterns of proximity promoting behavior, inaccessibility, coldness) is associated with children’s formation of insecure attachment. Given the pattern of caregiving responsiveness necessary to foster secure attachment, research must consider the contextual factors that influence caregiving practices (Solomon & George, 1996). Just as direct and indirect exposure to interparental violence during early childhood relates to a host of socioemotional difficulties, Levendosky, Lannert, and Yalch (2012) claim that children are especially susceptible to developmental disruptions via inhibited parenting and damaged attachment security. Thus, as the development of insecure attachment is especially prominent in high conflict homes where children can experience fear and a lack of security from both environmental and familial relationships (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Greenberg et al., 1990; Sigleman & Rider, 2015), particular attention must be paid to the formation of child-mother attachment in homes plagued by interparental violence.
Interparental Violence and Insecure Child-Mother Attachment. Evidence supporting an association between interparental violence and decreased maternal caregiving quality is abundant (Buchanan, Power, & Verity, 2013; Lannert et al., 2014; Levendosky, Bogat, & Huth-Bocks, 2011a; Levendosky, Bogat, Huth-Bocks, Rosenblum, & von Eye, 2011b; Radford & Hester, 2001; Zeanah, Danis, Hirshberg, Benoit, & Heller, 1999). The overarching consensus is that caregiving quality is hindered through the indirect pathway of damaged psychological functioning, such as IPV induced trauma or depression. In developing a model to delineate the impact interparental violence has on parenting, Levendosky and Graham-Bermann (2001) assert that mothers’ psychological functioning mediates the impact of abuse on maternal caregiving. Surveys from 120 mother-child dyads reveal that mothers who more significantly suffer from impaired psychological functioning due to victimization are more likely to report diminished caregiving practices (Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001). The psychological damage caused by IPV has the power to translate into an inability to provide physical or emotional care for children. Earlier work by Lyons-Ruth and Block (1996) suggests that limited responsiveness is the product of traumatized mothers’ self-protective “psychological mechanisms” (p. 272). Consistent with the claims made by Erel and Burman (1995), this suggests that violence within the mother-father system spills over to affect maternal caregiving, and ultimately the mother-child relationship, through the pathway of mothers’ psychological state.

Particularly concerning is the claim that patterns of inhibited maternal caregiving cartwheels into diminished child-mother attachment security (Levendosky et al., 2011a;
Levendosky et al., 2011b; Zeanah et al., 1999). The waxing and waning of IPV severity corresponds to fluctuations in maternal psychological functioning, thus cascading into unstable patterns of caregiving responsiveness (Zeanah et al., 1999). Displays of maternal responsiveness increase as IPV severity decreases, but then plummet back down as the abuse increases again (Levendosky et al., 2011b). Recognizing the hindrance maternal experiences of IPV create for caregiving quality and responsiveness, Levendosky et al. (2011b) assert that IPV is an “assault on the caregiving system” (p. 516). This uncertainty in what care to expect from their mothers, especially in the high threat environment of IPV plagued homes, causes children to develop both a fear for and of their mother (Zeanah et al., 1999). In discussing preschool children’s experience of interparental violence, Eisikovits and Winstok (2001) declare that for children growing up in home environments characterized by hostility and conflict rather than harmony and intimacy, “closeness is redefined as dangerous” (p. 206).

Using an attachment perspective to consider mothering and child outcomes in the context of interparental violence, Levendosky, Lannert, and Yalch (2012) assert that preschool children are at an increased risk for developing insecure attachment. As attachment security is a product of caregiving responsiveness (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Guralnick, 2006; Sigleman & Rider, 2015), this cycle of inconsistent support, as noted by Levendosky and team (2011b), is especially disruptive to attachment. In a longitudinal exploration of attachment formation and stability throughout early childhood in the context of IPV, Levendosky et al. (2011b) found that interparental violence was a significant risk factor for insecure child-mother attachment during early childhood.
Whereas low levels of reported IPV were associated with secure attachment, higher levels IPV were associated with insecure attachment (Levendosky et al., 2011b). This suggests that just as the psychological trauma from IPV manifests in disrupted maternal caregiving (Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001; Levendosky et al., 2011a), it also corresponds to disrupted child-mother attachment throughout the preschool years (Levendosky et al., 2011b).

Buchanan and team (2013) also highlight that abused mothers’ experiences of fear play a powerful role in child-mother attachment formation. Combining semi-structured interviews and focus groups, Buchanan et al. (2013) reveal that some mothers fear showing their child attention and sensitivity, for it would often garner retaliation from their resentful, abusive partner. In these cases, mothers deliberately decreased their responsiveness in order to protect their child from potential physical harm. Though ultimately corresponding to insecure child-mother attachment, it is compelling that intentionally reducing caregiving was driven by the desire to protect their children.

While abused mothers’ challenges have garnered the most empirical attention, thus generally supporting the claim that violent parental relationships spillover to damage mother-child relationships, recognizing abused mothers’ compensatory efforts is also important for a holistic understanding of mothering in the context of interparental violence.

**Interparental Violence and Secure Child-Mother Attachment.** Detailed by Masten and Gewritz (2006), compensatory models hypothesize that positive influences in a child’s life can “counterbalance” the presence of negative influences. In general,
evidence suggests that positive parenting behavior mediates the negative effect of parental conflict on child functioning (Fabes, Gaertner, & Popp, 2006; Matsen & Gerwitz, 2006), yet considerably little attention has been aimed specifically at abused mothers’ positive parenting efforts. Arguing that empirical emphasis on deficits alone paints a distorted image of abused mothers as incapable of protecting and caring for their children, Radford and Hester (2001) call for shifting the paradigm from “mother-blaming” to paying attention to their resiliency and compensatory efforts. Though literature on negative mother-child outcomes in the context of interparental violence is pervasive, a smaller, yet compelling, pool of evidence suggests the potential for stronger mother-child relationships via compensatory caregiving (Levendosky, Huth-Bocks, Shapiro, & Semel, 2003; Levendosky, Lynch, & Graham-Bermann, 2000). Newland, Ciciolla, and Crnic (2015), in exploring the parental hostility and parent-child relationships during the preschool years, found that mothers employ deliberate compensatory strategies in the face of paternal hostility. Levendosky, Lynch, and Graham-Bermann (2000) examined maternal narratives revolving around parenting through domestic violence, and found evidence of positive effects on maternal caregiving. Specifically, in an effort to buffer their preschool children from the negative effects of violence exposure, some abused mothers showcase increased empathy, responsiveness, and protectiveness towards their children. It was not the violence itself that related to positive parenting, but this active engagement was fueled by the desire to compensate for the violence for the sake of their children’s wellbeing (Levendosky et al., 2000).
Work by Levendosky, Huth-Bocks, Shapiro, and Semel (2003) extends these findings to child-mother attachment security by also highlighting the adoption of abused mothers’ compensation strategies. In the first empirical analysis of preschoolers’ attachment security in the context of IPV, Levendosky et al. (2003) found that parenting practices and child-mother attachment security are significantly related. Consistent with contemporary attachment literature (Ainsworth et al., 1978), mothers who displayed more positive caregiving had preschool children who were more securely attached. However, the most striking revelation was that severe IPV directly related to higher parenting effectiveness and secure attachment. Abused mothers’ deliberate strategies aimed at fostering mother-child relationships, such as increasing responsiveness, ultimately increased patterns of secure attachment. Additionally, Greenberg and colleagues (1990) point out that in the context of very high interparental conflict, the mother-child relationship may be the only close relationship a mother has, potentially nurturing stronger child-mother attachment.

Despite arguments for compensatory caregiving preserving secure child-mother attachments in the context of IPV, the substantial body of evidence linking interparental violence to disrupted attachment (Levendosky et al., 2011a; Levendosky et al., 2011b; Zeanah et al., 1999) does cast doubt on these claims. Most notably, support for stronger attachment security in violent homes has been provided through small, qualitative studies. A lack of comparison groups and rigorous controls, though common in preliminary family violence research (Barnett et al., 2011), limits confidence in the interpretation of such findings. Thus, generalizability and utility is greatly diminished.
While these studies do provide a provocative argument for stronger child-mother bonds in the face of interparental violence, thus contradicting the growing consensus that IPV damages parenting quality and child-mother attachment, it is clear that quantitative methods drawing from representative samples are needed to further solidify our understanding of this complex correlation. With the evidence stemming from grounded theory provided in this review of literature as a foundation, the present study aims to expand our understanding of the links between interparental violence and child-mother attachment security during early childhood through analysis of a large, nationally representative data set.

**Interparental Violence, Mother-Child Relationships, and Parental Relationship Stability**

Just as evidence indicates that dynamics within father-mother dyads have implications for mother-child relationships, a family systems perspective underscores the reciprocity of all familial relationships by suggesting mother-child dyads also have implications for parental dyads (Cox & Paley, 1997; Erel & Burman, 1995; Fincham, 1998). From this systems approach, it must be recognized that children are not passive members of the family system, but rather are active participants in the navigation of all familial processes (Broderick, 1993). Emphasizing circular familial processes, evidence clearly indicates that children alter parental relationships, specifically as couples reorganize the dynamics of their relationship in order to accommodate the needs of children (Cox & Paley, 1997). Given this perspective, Fincham (1998) highlights the need for researchers to recognize the influence children hold over parental relationships.
In the context of interparental violence, the power mother-child relationships hold over parental relationships is highlighted by abused mothers’ stay/leave decisions. Though all women are faced with a multitude of factors influencing decisions to stay or leave an abusive relationship, including violence severity, safety concerns, financial stability, and relationship commitment (McDonough, 2010; Rosbult & Martz, 1995; Thomas, Goodman, & Putnins, 2015), motherhood adds a unique additional layer to that decision making process. When conducting in depth interviews with mothers on their responses to intimate partner violence, Meyer (2011) found that stay/leave decisions are heavily influenced by the presence of children. This finding is consistent with earlier discussion on mothering and IPV provided by Radford and Hester (2001), in which they recognize children’s ability to shape maternal decision-making processes by both encouraging and deterring the choice to maintain or dissolve an abusive relationship. Given children’s role in this decision making process, it must be recognized that children and mother-child relationships are closely linked to the stability of violent parental relationships.

Role of Children in Maintaining Stable Violent Parental Relationships

In focus groups with women involved in the legal system for IPV conducted by Rhodes, Cerulli, Dichter, Kothari, and Barg (2010), mothers expressed that the influence their children had on initially maintaining abusive parental relationships revolved around the desire to keep their family together. Similarly, in a qualitative study of women staying in domestic violence shelters, one emerging theme was that a two-parent household was believed to be the best family structure for children (Rasool, 2016). As
dissolving an abusive relationship often involves mothers taking their children out of a two-parent household and into a new family structure, a primary consideration for mothers choosing to maintain a stable abusive relationship is the desire to preserve an ideal family structure for their children. In both studies, mothers expressed that being a “good mother” meant putting the needs of children (i.e., providing a familial system with both parents) before their own. Consistent with earlier work (Radford & Hester, 2001), these social expectations of motherhood are especially concerning for those experiencing IPV, as these mothers were compelled to sacrifice their own safety in order to maintain the desired family structure for their children.

Another factor in this decision-making process is mothers’ desire to ensure the safety of their children. Through interviews with mothers in domestic violence shelters, Meyer (2011) found that 77% initially remained silent about the abuse in order to protect their children from potential harm. As expressed through these interviews, the risk of harm towards their children would often increase if a mother attempted to dissolve the relationship. Threats made by abusers to harm their children if they ever attempted to leave was a driving force for these mothers to keep the abuse undisclosed, as remaining in the relationship was deemed the safest option for their children at the time (Meyer, 2011).

A final consideration pointing to children as a driving force behind parental relationship stability is the intense fear abused mothers have of formal intervention. Disclosure to formal support agencies, such as police, Child Protective Services (CPS) or related agencies, complicates help seeking decisions due to fear of potentially losing
custody of their children (Meyer, 2011). When these professionals are involved, abused mothers are often given an ultimatum: leave the abuser or lose custody of your children (Radford & Hester, 2001; Rhodes et al., 2010). This tactic, though intended to encourage the wellbeing and safety of children in dangerous home environments, adds a layer of “mother-blaming” by placing full responsibility for the situation on the abused mother while completely ignoring the actions of the abusive father (Radford & Hester, 2001). The fear of losing their children inhibits mothers from seeking help, ultimately encouraging the stability of abusive parental relationships (Rhodes et al., 2010).

**Role of Children in Dissolving Violent Parental Relationships**

In addition to children holding power over the stability of violent parental relationships, the presence of children in the home can act conversely as a motivator to a mother in dissolving an abusive relationship. Large study surveying 2,276 female victims of IPV found that the most prominent predictor of help-seeking behavior was the presence of children (Meyer, 2010). This analysis also revealed that mothers of children who witnessed IPV were 3.5 times more likely to seek help in ending the relationship. Acts or threats of violence towards children and recognition of psychological damage from exposure to interparental violence encourages mothers to take steps towards dissolving the relationship in order to protect their children from harm (Moe, 2009; Rasool, 2016).

Through qualitative focus groups with abused mothers, Randall, Bledsoe, Shroff, and Pierce (2012) found that the most important factor motivating mothers to dissolve
abusive relationships was recognizing the negative impact of interparental violence on their children. The shift in harm towards their children changed maternal perceptions of what was “normal.” Echoed by Rasool (2016), mothers’ realization that their children were suffering helped them “find the courage” to leave. These findings are consistent with Rhodes et al. (2010) who found that mothers’ awareness of the danger their children were in was the “tipping point” motivating help-seeking behavior and relationship dissolution. Just as expectations associated with the role of “mother” includes enduring abuse in order to meet children’s need of a stable family unit, the responsibility to act as a “protector” is just a critical (Rasool, 2016). Once a fear for their children’s physical or emotional safety has been established, the social climate dictates that mothers must act in order to protect them (Randall et al., 2012).

The overarching consensus is that children do have an influence on a mother’s decisions to maintain or dissolve abusive relationships. Mothers maintain an abusive relationship when they believe staying is in the best interest of their children and take steps to dissolve it when they believe the environment has become too harmful. Based on a mother’s perceptions of motherhood and strategies to foster developmentally appropriate environments (Meyer, 2010; Rasool, 2016; Secco, Letourneau, & Collins, 2016), it is compelling that children both encourage and deter parental relationship stability (Meyer, 2011; Rhodes et al., 2010; Vatnar & Bjorkly, 2010). Stay/leave decisions are thoroughly considered (Meyer, 2011) and constructed based on what mothers perceive to be in the best interest of their children at the time of deliberation (Moe, 2009). Clearly, mothers’ relationships with, and responsibilities to, their children
must be considered in the trajectory of violent interparental relationships (Randell et al., 2012). The present study will examine the mother-child bond in relation to the stability of violent parental relationships.

**Mother-Child Attachment and Parental Relationship Stability.** Though literature indicates that children and mother-child relationships play a critical role in the trajectories of violent parental relationships (e.g., Meyer, 2011 and Rhodes et al., 2010), further investigation is necessary to untangle the complexity of this association. Specifically, considerations through the lens of mother-child attachment security have yet to be explored. Just as the reciprocal nature of families indicates the parental system shapes child-mother relationships and attachment (Erel & Burman, 1995; Greenberg et al., 1990), child-mother attachment conversely may hold implications for the parental relationship (Cox & Paley, 1997). While the study of child-mother attachment has classically discussed its implication for children’s development (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Greenberg et al., 1990; Sigleman & Rider, 2015), a family systems perspective suggests that this dyadic bond might also be recognized for its ability to influence dynamics within the larger familial system (Cox & Paley, 1997). Given that children and mother-child relationships are an integral component of violent parental relationship trajectories, empirical exploration of child-mother attachment and parental relationship stability is warranted. The present study will utilize quantitative analysis to explore this issue.

**Statement of the Problem**

Further research is necessary to disentangle the circular nature of family processes in violent homes. There is mixed consensus regarding the impact of interparental
violence on mother-child attachment security. While some have argued that stronger child-mother attachments surface in violent families, the present review of literature primarily supports the claim that maternal experiences of IPV are associated with the development of insecure child-mother attachment. In light of the implications of attachment in early childhood for lifelong functioning, it is important to undertake quantitative analysis that will expand our understanding of attachment development in preschool children. Furthermore, while the correlation between violence and relationship dissolution has been well established in the literature, child-mother attachment has not been empirically examined as a contributing factor to the maintenance or dissolution of parental relationships. The current research aims to address this gap in the literature by establishing a more comprehensive conceptualization of the nature of mother-child and mother-father relationships in the context of violence plagued homes.

The overarching goal of the proposed investigation is to explore the interplay between interparental violence, mother-child attachment and parental relationship stability. Thus, the primary objective is to provide evidence of the consequences of interparental violence for child-mother attachment within preschool children. By capitalizing on the availability of longitudinal data, a secondary goal is to explore the predictive nature of both child-mother attachment and interparental violence on parental relationship stability.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The current study drew from data provided by the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS). FFCWS is a large, nationally representative study employing an on-going, longitudinal design to follow a cohort of nearly 5,000 children and their parents across six waves of data collection (“About the FFCWS Study,” 2017a). Though data were collected from both married and unmarried new parents, FFCWS specifically oversampled unmarried parents at the time of the focal child’s birth (Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 2001). Thus, the term “fragile family” refers to the belief that unmarried families are susceptible to a host of risk factors and parental instability. By measuring a wide range of variables relating to individual and familial functioning, and utilizing a multitude of data collection methods, FFCWS sought to uncover the familial environments of “fragile families.” Behaviors of unmarried parents, reports of child wellbeing, dynamics and stability of parental relationships (including measurement of conflict and abuse), and their relation to policy implications were of specific interest.

In order to gain a nationally representative sample of unwed families, FFCWS employed a three-stage stratified random sampling technique (Reichman et al., 2001). First, U.S. cities with populations larger than 200,000 citizens were clustered based on policy regulations and market conditions, and randomly selected to maximize representativeness. Second, birthing hospitals within each city were randomly selected—though an emphasis was placed on hospitals that reported high numbers of unmarried
births. Finally, births within each hospital were randomly selected. This resulted in a total sample of 4,700 births (3,600 unmarried; 1,100 married) from 75 hospitals in 20 U.S. cities. Both mothers and fathers were interviewed in the hospital within a few days of the focal child’s birth. Follow up interviews were conducted when the child was one, three, five, nine and fifteen years old (“About the FFCWS Study,” 2017a). In collaboration with “add on studies,” in home assessments were conducted at years three and five (Reichman et al., 2001).

Sample

The sample for the current study has been drawn from year three (collected between 2001 and 2003) and year five (collected between 2003 and 2006) of the public use FFCWS data set. These waves were when the focal child was approximately three and five years old, respectively. Although data had been collected from both mothers and fathers at each wave, the current study solely utilized mothers’ self-reports to uncover maternal perceptions of interparental violence, mother-child attachment and parental relationship stability.

Though the total data set contains nearly 5,000 families, the current study utilized a subsample of these participants. To be included in the subsample, families had to fit the following criterion variables: 1) maternal report of a stable romantic relationship with the focal child’s father at year three and 2) completion of the child-mother attachment measurement at year three. Measure of relationship status at year three stemmed from maternal responses to item D6 of the Mothers’ Three-Year Follow-Up Survey, which asked “are mother and father currently married or romantically involved with each
other?” Mothers who responded “yes” were included in the subsample. Measure of attachment at year three stemmed from maternal responses to Toddler Attachment Sort-39 (TAS-39) within the Three-Year In-Home Longitudinal Study of Preschool Aged Children Activity Booklet. Thus, only families with complete attachment information, and a stable parental relationship, were included. Families who fit these criteria were pulled from the original data files and their ID numbers were matched in order to merge them into a new data file for analyses. The sample for the current study contained 1,237 families.

At the time of initial data collection, 60% of the “fragile families” surveyed were 20-29 years old, 24% were under the age of 20, and 16% were 30 or older. The majority of respondents self-identified as Black non-Hispanic (69%), with the remaining sample identifying as Hispanic (19%), White non-Hispanic (8%), or other (4%). Almost all of those sampled were born in the U.S. (87%) and over half of the sample were high school graduates (59%). These sample characteristics closely match those reflected in the U.S. population at the time, with the only major discrepancy being an under representation of White non-Hispanic respondents (Reichman et al., 2001).

Of the families included in the sample for this study, 93% of mothers reported that they currently lived with the focal child’s father at year three. The majority of mothers reported living in a household with 4 or fewer members (75.8%), with the remaining sample (24.2%) living in a household with 5 or more members. Over half of the respondents reported that they rented the home they lived in (55.4%), approximately one-third owned their home (31.9%), and the remaining families (12.7%) lived in some
sort of temporary housing arrangement such as with other relatives or in a shelter.

Employment status was relatively even across the sample, with 54.2% of mothers stating that they were currently employed compared to 45.7% who were unemployed.

Measures

This study utilized items from both year three and year five of the FFCWS dataset in a secondary analysis to consider the interrelatedness of interparental violence, child-mother attachment and parental relationship stability. For each measure, any cases with missing data were excluded. The following sections provide a detailed description of each measure. The codebook created for the current study is available upon request.

Father-to-Mother Violence

Father-to-mother violence served as an independent variable in the current study. Measures of father-to-mother violence were self-reported via the Mothers’ Three-Year Follow-Up Survey (Bendheim-Thoman Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, 2013). This survey data was pulled from the FFCWS public use datafile “ffmom3ypv2,” (“Year three core,” 2008). Section D7 of the survey included twelve items assessing maternal reports of fathers’ behavior which were measured on a Likert-scale with response options of 1 (often), 2 (sometimes), or 3 (never). Multiple items included in this section were reflective of abusive behavior, specifically psychological, physical, and sexual intimate partner violence. Each item that was related to violent behavior was reverse coded in the data file so that a higher value equated to a higher level of reported violence. Thus, final coding for analyses were as follows: 1 (never), 2 (sometimes), 3 (often).
Measurement items which were reflective of psychological violence included D7C (“He insults or criticizes your ideas”), D7E (“He tries to keep you from seeing or talking with your friends or family”), and D7F (“He tries to prevent you from going to work or school”). Responses on these three items were averaged and combined into one variable (named “PSYCH_IPV1”) representing a score of reported psychological interparental violence. Measurement items which were reflective of physical violence included D7H (“He slaps or kicks you”) and D7I (“He hits you with a fist or an object that could hurt you”). Responses on these two items were averaged and combined into one variable (named “PHYSICAL_IPV1”) representing a score of reported physical interparental violence. The measurement item which was reflective of sexual violence included D7J (“He tries to make you have sex or do sexual things you don’t want to do”). As this was the only item which addressed sexual violence, it was not combined with any other items. This item was named “SEXUAL_IPV1.” A measure of “COMBINED_IPV1” was created by averaging the three previous measures of IPV into a single score to represent an overall IPV score. As each of these measures of IPV (psychological, physical, sexual, and combined) could generate a score anywhere between 1.00-3.00, this variable was continuous.

**Child-Mother Attachment**

Included in the survey on Child Care and Parental Employment, one of the collaborative studies incorporated into the FFCWS project (“Completed Collaborative Studies,” 2017b), measures of child-mother attachment were collected via the in-home assessment portion of Year Three (Bendheim-Thoman Center for Research on Child
Through the Three-Year In-Home Longitudinal Study of Preschool Aged Children Activity Booklet, mothers completed an adapted version of The Toddler Attachment Q-Sort (TAS-39). Mothers were given 39 cards with statements about their child’s attachment related behavior and asked to sort them into various piles based on the frequency of their child engaging in that behavior. For example, “Hugs or cuddles with mother without being asked,” “Relaxes when in contact with mother,” and “Is very independent.” The FFCWS team created models based on mothers’ responses which classified children into three categories (insecure-avoidant, insecure-resistant, and secure). Child-mother attachment served as a dependent variable for research question one of the current study, as well as an independent variable for research question two.

The publicly available FFCWS datafile “ff_attachment_variables” (“Year three in-home,” 2011) provides both a dichotomous measure of children’s attachment security, as well as a three-way categorical measure. The dichotomous measure of attachment classified children as having either secure or insecure attachment. In this measure, all scores of insecure-avoidant and insecure-resistant had been collapsed into one classification of “insecure.” This item was named “ATTACH” in the datafile created for this study. The three-way categorical measure broke down the data into the three attachment classifications, insecure-avoidant, insecure-resistant, and secure. This item was named “ATTACH_abc.” The current study utilized both of these measures in order to consider secure/insecure, as well as the more detailed information available within the two additional insecure categories provided. Both measures were categorical.
Parental Relationship Stability

Provided in the FFCWS “ffmom5ypv1” datafile (“Year five core,” 2008), measure of parental relationship stability was extracted from the Mothers’ Five-Year Follow-Up Survey. Item D4 in this instrument asks “are mother and father currently married or romantically involved with each other?” (Bendheim-Thoman Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, 2013). This item was named “Y5_RS” in the datafile created for this study. For the purposes of this study, mothers who responded “yes” were considered to have maintained their relationship. Mothers who responded “no” were considered to have dissolved their relationship. This was a dichotomous, categorical variable.

Procedure

The FFCWS public use datasets from Year Three and Year Five were downloaded from Princeton University’s Office of Population Research (OPR) online data archive. The specific variables of interest for this study were selected from each data set and merged into one data file. The assigned identification numbers were used to match data across the original datasets. After matching, the final data set for the present data analyzed the following variables: interparental violence, child-mother attachment, and parental relationship stability. Further specificities of variable measurements can be found in Table 2.

Data Analysis

Logistic regression analyses were conducted to answer research question one: What is the association between interparental violence and child-mother attachment? Chi
Square analyses were conducted to answer research question two: Does child-mother attachment predict parental relationship stability? Logistic regression analyses were conducted to answer research question three: Is the association between child-mother attachment and parental relationship stability stronger than the association between interparental violence and parental relationship stability?

Table 2.

Summary of Variable Measurements

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<th>Variable</th>
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<th>Variable Classification</th>
<th>Variable Label</th>
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<td>PSYCH_IPV1</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Three-Year In-Home Longitudinal Study of Preschool Aged Children Activity Booklet</td>
<td>Secure</td>
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CHAPTER IV

ARTICLE

Grounded in both family systems and attachment theories, the current study explores the interplay between interparental violence, child-mother attachment, and parental relationship stability. Literature indicating that father-to-mother interparental violence influences maternal caregiving practices, thus shaping child-mother attachment, is presented. Highlighting the reciprocal nature of familial systems, child-mother attachment as a contributor to parental relationship trajectories is discussed. In an effort to clarify family processes in violent homes, the present study addresses the need to explore the ramifications interparental violence yields for child-mother attachment, as well as the role child-mother attachment plays in parental relationship stability.

Review of Literature

Intimate partner violence is a widespread problem in the United States. Defined by the Intimate Partner Violence Surveillance: Uniform Definitions and Recommendations Data Elements guide developed by the Center for Disease Control, intimate partner violence (IPV) “includes physical violence, sexual violence, stalking and psychological aggression (including coercive tactics) by a current or former intimate partner” (Breiding, Basile, Smith, Black, & Mahendra, 2015, p. 11). The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS), an ongoing nationally representative measure capturing the incidence and prevalence rates of violent victimization, reveals that 32.4% of U.S. women have experienced physical violence by an intimate partner, a figure representing over 39 million U.S. women (Smith et al.,
2017). Sexual violence had been experienced by 16.4% of female responders and nearly half of U.S. women (47.1%) have experienced psychological aggression from an intimate partner, an alarming figure representing over 56 million U.S. women. Though data indicate that both men and women are subject to IPV (Breiding et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2017), evidence suggests that a greater level of negative impact is experienced by female victims (Breiding et al., 2014). Coupled with the identification of males as the primary perpetrators of IPV across measurement instruments (Hamby, 2014), it is critical to pay particular attention to the implications of female victimization.

**Interparental Violence**

By recognizing the reciprocal nature of all behaviors, emotions, and interactions within the family unit, family systems theory focuses on the interrelatedness of family dynamics and processes (Bornstein & Sawyer, 2006; Smith & Hamon, 2012). Family systems theory posits that any interaction within or across subsystems has ramifications for other subsystems in the family, ultimately shaping the functioning of the entire unit (Cox & Paley, 1997). With this systems perspective, it must be recognized that many women who experience IPV are likely mothers embedded within a familial system. Discussing violence between parents simply in terms of “intimate partner violence” theoretically implies this violence generates implications only for the mother-father dyad, thus covertly disregarding its influence on children in the family system (Eisikovits & Winstok, 2001). As such, framing violence between parents as “interparental violence” in the present study recognizes that violent interactions have implications beyond the parental dyad and deliberately accounts for children in the family system.
Utilizing data from substantiated domestic violence cases, Fantuzzo and Fucso (2007) reveal that couples experiencing IPV are more likely to have children living in the household than to be childless. In fact, an estimated 15.5 million U.S. children live in homes plagued by intimate partner violence (McDonald, Jouriles, Ramisetty-Mikler, & Caetana, 2006). More recently, The National Survey of Children’s Exposure to Violence (NatScev), a large, nationally representative study surveying violence exposure among American youth, indicated that 1 out of every 15 children are exposed to interparental violence annually, with fathers identified as the primary perpetrators (Hamby, Finkelhor, Turner, & Ormrod, 2011). Fantuzzo and Fucso (2007) also revealed that children under 6 years old are disproportionately exposed to interparental violence. Though children of all ages are susceptible to negative consequences from interparental violence (The HealthPath Foundation, 2017), the high rate of exposure during this period elevates the concern specifically for preschool aged children. With limited cognitive capacity to understand and cope with conflict during early childhood, preschool children exposed to interparental violence are especially susceptible to developmental disruptions (Kitzmann, Gaylord, Holt, & Kenny, 2003; Levendosky, Lannert, & Yalch, 2012). With argument that the preschool years may serve as a “critical period” in the long-term consequence of interparental violence exposure (Holmes, 2013), it is especially imperative to consider the ramifications of interparental violence and development for preschool-aged children.

**Interparental Violence and Child-Mother Attachment**

With much work highlighting the negative consequences of interparental violence for children’s functioning (e.g., Kitzmann et al., 2003; The HealthPath Foundation of
Ohio, 2017), one implication relates to mother-child relationships (Buchanan, Power, & Verity, 2013; Margolin, Gordis, & Oliver, 2004; Nicklas & Mackenzie, 2013). Erel and Burman (1995) describe two diverging theories permeating the literature on the interrelatedness of parental relationship and parent-child relationships: the spillover hypothesis and the compensatory hypothesis. The spillover hypothesis posits that conflict within the mother-father relationship “spills over” to create disruptions within the mother-child relationship, whereas the compensatory model challenges this by suggesting mother-father conflict inspires deliberate compensation efforts within the mother-child system. Maternal caregiving characterized by either spillover or compensatory efforts yields implications for the mother-child relationship (Erel & Burman, 1995).

Attachment security is often considered the classic measure of mother-child relationship quality (Greenberg, Cicchetti, & Cummings, 1990). Foundational work by Ainsworth and colleagues (1978) indicates patterns of high maternal responsiveness (i.e., proximity promoting behavior, accessibility, warmth) cascades into children forming a secure attachment. In contrast, low maternal responsiveness (i.e., inconsistent patterns of proximity promoting behavior, inaccessibility, coldness) is associated with children’s formation of insecure attachment. Literature claiming the development of insecure attachment is prominent in high conflict homes, where children can experience fear and a lack of security from familial relationships, is pervasive (e.g., Ainsworth et al., 1978; Greenberg et al., 1990; Sigleman & Rider, 2015). Thus, particular attention must be paid to the formation of child-mother attachment in homes plagued by interparental violence.
Interparental Violence and Insecure Attachment. Evidence supporting an association between interparental violence and hindered mother-child relationships is abundant (e.g., Buchanan, Power, & Verity, 2013; Lannert et al., 2014; Radford & Hester, 2001). Particularly concerning is the association between maternal experiences of interparental violence and diminished child-mother attachment security (Levendosky, Bogat, & Huth-Bocks, 2011a; Levendosky, Bogat, Huth-Bocks, Rosenblum, & von Eye, 2011b; Zeanah, Danis, Hirshberg, Benoit, & Heller, 1999). In a longitudinal exploration of attachment formation and stability throughout early childhood, Levendosky and colleagues (2011b) found that interparental violence was a significant risk factor for insecure child-mother attachment. Low levels of reported IPV were associated with secure attachment, whereas high levels of IPV were associated with insecure attachment. Asserting that IPV is an “assault on the caregiving system” (p. 516), Levendosky, et al. (2011b) reveal a direct link between IPV, hindered maternal caregiving quality, and insecure child-mother attachment. Consistent with the argument for the spillover hypothesis put forth by Erel and Burman (1995), this suggests that violence within the mother-father system can spillover to inhibit maternal caregiving and, ultimately, disrupt child-mother attachment.

Interparental Violence and Secure Attachment. Though the growing line of research points to inhibited maternal caregiving cartwheeling into disrupted child-mother attachment in the face of interparental violence (Levendosky et al., 2011a; Levendosky et al., 2001b; Zeanah et al., 1999), a smaller, yet compelling, pool of evidence suggests a potential for increased secure child-mother attachments (Levendosky, Huth-Bocks,
Shapiro, & Semel, 2003; Levendosky, Lynch, & Graham-Bermann, 2000). In the first empirical analysis of preschoolers’ attachment security in the context of IPV, Levendosky et al. (2003) found that parenting practices and child-mother attachment security were significantly related, and more severe IPV directly related to higher parenting effectiveness and secure attachment. Positive parenting was fueled by the desire to counterbalance the negative impact of a violent home. Abused mothers’ deliberate strategies aimed at fostering mother-child relationships (e.g., increased responsiveness, empathy and protectiveness), and increased secure child-mother attachment, provides support for the compensatory hypothesis.

Despite some argument for compensatory caregiving preserving secure child-mother attachments in the context of IPV, the substantial body of evidence linking interparental violence to disrupted attachment casts doubt on these claims. Most notably, support for secure attachments in violent homes has been provided only through small, qualitative studies. A lack of comparison groups and rigorous controls, though common in preliminary family violence research (Barnett, Miller-Perrin, & Perrin, 2011), limits confidence in the generalizability and utility of these findings. While these studies do provide a provocative argument for stronger child-mother bonds in the face of interparental violence, quantitative methods utilizing representative samples are needed to further solidify our understanding of this complex correlation. The present study aims to expand our understanding of the links between interparental violence and child-mother attachment security during early childhood through analysis of a large, nationally representative data set.
Interparental Violence, Mother-Child Relationships, and Parental Relationship Stability

Just as evidence indicates that dynamics within father-mother dyads have implications for mother-child relationships, a family systems perspective underscores the reciprocity of all familial relationships by suggesting mother-child dyads also have implications for parental dyads (Cox & Paley, 1997; Erel & Burman, 1995; Fincham, 1998). Emphasizing circular familial processes, literature clearly indicates that children alter parental relationships (Cox & Paley, 1997). In the context of interparental violence, the power mother-child relationships hold over parental relationships is highlighted by abused mothers’ stay/leave decisions. Though all women are faced with a multitude of factors influencing decisions to stay or leave an abusive relationship, including violence severity, safety concerns, financial stability, and relationship commitment (McDonough, 2010; Rosbult & Martz, 1995; Thomas, Goodman, & Putnins, 2015), motherhood adds an additional layer to that decision-making process. Stay/leave decisions are heavily influenced by the presence of children in that they have the ability to inspire mothers to both maintain and also dissolve an abusive relationship (Meyer, 2011; Radford & Hester, 2001).

The desire to preserve a two-parent family structure (Rasool, 2016; Rhodes, Cerulli, Dichter, Kothari, & Barg, 2010) and fear of losing custody of children through disclosure to formal intervention agencies (e.g., police, child protective services) (Meyer, 2011; Radford & Hester, 2001; Rhodes et al., 2010) drives mothers to maintain violent relationships. Threats made by abusive fathers to harm children if the mother attempts to
leave further force the stability of many abusive relationships, as staying is their only option to protect the children (Meyer, 2011). Conversely, the presence of children also motivates mothers to dissolve an abusive relationship. A large study surveying 2,276 female victims of IPV found that the most prominent predictor of help-seeking behavior was the presence of children (Meyer, 2010). Mothers of children who witnessed IPV were 3.5 times more likely to take steps to end the relationship. Acts or threats of violence towards children and recognition of psychological damage from exposure to interparental violence, encourages mothers to take steps towards dissolving the relationship to protect children from harm (Moe, 2009; Randall, Bledsoe, Shroff, & Pierce, 2012; Rasool, 2016). Based on a mother’s desire to protect their children and employing strategies to foster developmentally appropriate environments (Meyer, 2010; Rasool, 2016; Secco, Letourneau, & Collins, 2016), it is compelling that children both encourage and deter parental relationship stability (Meyer, 2011; Rhodes et al., 2010; Vatnar & Bjorkly, 2010). Thus, mothers’ relationships with, and responsibilities to, their children must be considered in the trajectory of violent interparental relationships (Randell et al., 2012).

**Relationship Stability and Attachment.** Though literature indicates that children and mother-child relationships play a critical role in the trajectories of violent parental relationships (e.g., Meyer, 2011 and Rhodes et al., 2010), further investigation is necessary to untangle this association. Specifically, considerations through the lens of mother-child attachment security have yet to be explored. Just as the reciprocal nature of families indicates parental systems shape child-mother relationships and attachment (Erel
& Burman, 1995; Greenberg et al., 1990), child-mother attachment may also hold implications for the parental relationship (Cox & Paley, 1997). Given that children and mother-child relationships are an integral component of violent parental relationship trajectories, empirical exploration of child-mother attachment and parental relationship stability in the present study is warranted.

Purpose

Grounded in both family systems and attachment theories, the current study aims to address the gap in knowledge about the reciprocity between interparental violence, child-mother attachment and parental relationship stability. Despite mixed consensus regarding the impact of interparental violence on mother-child attachment security, and the argument that stronger child-mother attachment may surface in violent families, the present review of literature primarily supports an association between interparental violence and the development of insecure child-mother attachment. This study intends to further clarify this association. Furthermore, while the correlation between violence and relationship dissolution has been established in the literature, child-mother attachment has not yet been examined as a contributing factor in the maintenance or dissolution of parental relationships. The current research aims to address this gap by establishing a more comprehensive conceptualization of the nature of child-mother attachment and mother-father relationship trajectories in the context of violence plagued homes.

The following research questions and hypotheses guided this investigation:

Research Question 1: What is the association between interparental violence and child-mother attachment security?
- H1: Maternal reports of father-to-mother violence will be significantly related to maternal reports of child-mother insecure attachment.

Research Question 2: Does child-mother attachment predict parental relationship stability?

- H2: Maternal reports of secure child-mother attachment at year three will be predictive of maternal reports of maintained mother-father romantic relationships at year five.

Research Question 3: Is the association between child-mother attachment and parental relationship stability stronger than the association between interparental violence and parental relationship stability?

- H3: Maternal reports of father-to-mother interparental violence at year three will be predictive of dissolved mother-father romantic relationships at year five. The association between interparental violence and relationship stability will be stronger than that between attachment and relationship stability.
**Methodology**

The current study drew from data provided by the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS). FFCWS is a large, nationally representative study employing an on-going, longitudinal design to follow a cohort of nearly 5,000 children and their parents across six waves of data collection (“About the FFCWS Study,” 2017a). Though data were collected from both married and unmarried new parents, FFCWS specifically oversampled unmarried parents at the time of the focal child’s birth (Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 2001). Thus, the term “fragile family” refers to the belief that unmarried families are susceptible to a host of risk factors and parental instability. Employing a three-stage stratified random sampling technique (Reichman et al., 2001), FFCWS contained an initial sample of 4,700 births (3,600
unmarried; 1,100 married) from 75 hospitals in 20 U.S. cities. Both mothers and fathers were interviewed in the hospital within a few days of the focal child’s birth, with follow up interviews conducted when the child was one, three, five, nine and fifteen years old (“About the FFCWS Study,” 2017a). By measuring a wide range of variables relating to individual and familial functioning, and utilizing a multitude of data collection methods, FFCWS sought to uncover the familial environments of “fragile families.”

Sample

The sample for the current study was drawn from year three (collected between 2001 and 2003) and year five (collected between 2003 and 2006) of the public use FFCWS data set. These waves were when the focal child was approximately three and five years old, respectively. Maternal self-reports were utilized to uncover perceptions of interparental violence, mother-child attachment and parental relationship stability. To be included in the subsample for the current study, families had to fit the following criterion variables: 1) maternal report of a stable romantic relationship with the focal child’s father at year three and 2) completion of the child-mother attachment measurement at year three. The sample for the current study contained 1,237 families.

At the time of initial data collection, 60% of the “fragile families” surveyed were 20-29 years old, 24% were under the age of 20, and 16% were 30 or older. The majority of respondents self-identified as Black non-Hispanic (69%), with the remaining sample identifying as Hispanic (19%), White non-Hispanic (8%), or other (4%). Almost all of those sampled were born in the U.S. (87%) and over half of the sample were high school graduates (59%). These sample characteristics closely match those reflected in the U.S.
population at the time, with the only major discrepancy being an under representation of White non-Hispanic respondents (Reichman et al., 2001).

Of the families included in the sample for the present study, 93% of mothers reported that they currently lived with the focal child’s father at year three. The majority of mothers reported living in a household with 4 or fewer members (75.8%), with the remaining sample (24.2%) living in a household with 5 or more members. Over half of the respondents reported that they rented the home they lived in (55.4%), approximately one-third owned their home (31.9%), and the remaining families (12.7%) lived in a temporary housing arrangement such as with other relatives or in a shelter. Employment status was relatively even across the sample, with 54.2% of mothers stating they were currently employed compared to 45.7% who were unemployed.

**Measures**

This study utilized items from both year three and year five of the FFCWS dataset. For each measure, any cases with missing data were excluded.

**Father-to-Mother Violence.** Father-to-mother violence served as an independent variable. Measures of father-to-mother violence were self-reported via the Mothers’ Three-Year Follow-Up Survey (Bendheim-Thoman Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, 2013). The survey included twelve items assessing maternal reports of fathers’ behavior which were measured on a Likert-scale with response options of 1 (often), 2 (sometimes), or 3 (never). Multiple items in this section reflected abusive behavior, specifically psychological, physical, and sexual intimate partner violence. Each
item that related to violent behavior was reverse coded so that a higher value equated to a higher level of reported violence.

Three items reflected psychological violence: “He insults or criticizes your ideas,” “He tries to keep you from seeing or talking with your friends or family,” and “He tries to prevent you from going to work or school.” Responses on these items were averaged and combined into one variable, representing a score of reported psychological interparental violence. Responses to two items reflecting physical violence (“He slaps or kicks you” and “He hits you with a fist or an object that could hurt you”) were averaged and combined into one variable, representing a score of reported physical interparental violence. One item reflected sexual violence: “He tries to make you have sex or do sexual things you don’t want to do.” A measure of “combined IPV” was created by averaging the three previous measures of IPV into a single score to represent an overall score of reported violence.

Child-Mother Attachment. Measures of child-mother attachment were collected via the Three-Year In-Home Longitudinal Study of Preschool Aged Children Activity Booklet during Year Three of data collection (Bendheim-Thoman Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, n.d.). Mothers completed an adapted version of The Toddler Attachment Q-Sort (TAS-39), in which they were given 39 cards with statements about their child’s behavior and asked to sort them into piles based on the frequency of their child engaging in that behavior. Examples include: “Hugs or cuddles with mother without being asked,” “Relaxes when in contact with mother,” and “Is very independent.”
Based on mothers’ responses, children were classified into one of three attachment categories: insecure-avoidant, insecure-resistant, or secure.

The publicly available FFCWS dataset provided both a dichotomous measure of children’s attachment security, as well as a three-way categorical measure. The three-way categorical measure consisted of three attachment classifications: insecure-avoidant, insecure-resistant, and secure. The dichotomous measure classified children as having either secure or insecure attachment (insecure-avoidant and insecure-resistant collapsed). The current study utilized both of these measures. Child-mother attachment served as a dependent variable for research question one of the current study, as well as an independent variable for research question two.

**Parental Relationship Stability.** Measure of parental relationship stability was extracted from the Mothers’ Five-Year Follow-Up Survey. This measure was assessed by maternal responses to the following item: “Are mother and father currently married or romantically involved with each other?” (Bendheim-Thoman Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, 2013). For the purposes of this study, mothers who responded “yes” were considered to have maintained their relationship, whereas mothers who responded “no” were considered to have dissolved their relationship.

**Procedure**

The FFCWS public use datasets from Year Three and Year Five were downloaded from Princeton University’s Office of Population Research (OPR) online data archive. The specific variables of interest for this study were selected from the original datafiles and merged into one datafile. The final dataset for the present data
analyzed the following variables: interparental violence, child-mother attachment, and parental relationship stability. Further specificities of variable measurements are reported in Table 1.

**Data Analysis**

Logistic regression analyses were conducted to answer research question one: What is the association between interparental violence and child-mother attachment? Chi Square analyses were conducted to answer research question two: Does child-mother attachment predict parental relationship stability? Logistic regression analyses were conducted to answer research question three: Is the association between child-mother attachment and parental relationship stability stronger than the association between interparental violence and parental relationship stability?

**Results**

**Interparental Violence**

Descriptive information about maternal reports of interparental violence at Year Three is reported in Table 2. As indicated in the combined category, 43% of mothers have been victim to some form of violence from the focal child’s father. This number is heavily driven by the high frequencies of reported psychological violence, as 42.7% of mothers indicated that they have experienced at least some level of psychological violence. Mothers in this sample very rarely reported physical violence (2%) or sexual violence (1.7%).
### Table 1.

*Summary of Theoretical and Empirical Constructs*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Construct</th>
<th>Empirical Construct</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conceptual Definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interparental violence</strong></td>
<td>Degree of father-to-mother violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child-mother attachment</strong></td>
<td>Security of child-mother attachment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insecure-Avoidant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insecure-Resistant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parental relationship stability</strong></td>
<td>Stability or dissolution of father-mother romantic relationship over 2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintained</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissolved</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2.  

Maternal Reports of Interparental Violence at Year Three

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IPV Type</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psych</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>708</td>
<td>57.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.01-2.00</td>
<td>508</td>
<td>41.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.01-3.00</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1212</td>
<td>98.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.01-2.00</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.01-3.00</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1215</td>
<td>98.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.01-2.00</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.01-3.00</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>705</td>
<td>57.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.01-2.00</td>
<td>530</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.01-3.00</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Attachment

Descriptive information about maternal reports of child-mother attachment at Year Three is reported in Table 3. As indicated there, over three-fourths (77.5%) of children were classified as securely attached to their mother. Though the majority of children in the sample were securely attached, nearly a quarter (22.5%) had insecure attachment. Under the umbrella of insecure attachment, most children were classified as insecure-resistant (20.5%), with less than 2% considered insecure-avoidant.

Table 3.

*Maternal Reports of Child-Mother Attachment at Year Three*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attachment Classification</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secure</td>
<td>959</td>
<td>77.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insecure</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>22.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidant</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resistant</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>20.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1237</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The association between interparental violence and child-mother attachment at Year Three was determined by conducting logistic regression analyses, in which interparental violence was the predictor and attachment type was the criterion. Results describing these associations are found in Table 4. As indicated there, analyses revealed no statistically significant relationships between interparental violence across violence type and attachment classification. Thus, hypothesis one was not supported. However,
examination of, the odds ratios reveals that the presence of violence does point in the direction of attachment classification. Considering the dichotomous secure/insecure attachment classification, an odds ratio lower than 1.00 is indicative of a higher likelihood of insecure attachment, whereas a score higher than 1.00 is indicative of a higher likelihood of secure attachment. Psychological violence yielded an odds ratio of .981, pointing to an increased likelihood of insecure attachment. The same is true for physical violence, with an odds ratio of .654, and combined violence, with an odds ratio of .970. Sexual violence was the only violence category in which the odds ratio (1.354) pointed towards an increased likelihood of secure attachment.

With secure attachment as an analytical reference, no statistically significant relationship was found between interparental violence and a child’s classification as insecure-avoidant or insecure-resistant. Once again, odds ratios reveal that the presence of violence points in the direction of attachment classification within this three-category analysis. As secure attachment was used as an analytical reference in running analyses for the insecure-avoidant and insecure-resistant categories, an odds ratio higher than 1.00 is indicative of a higher likelihood of insecure attachment, whereas a score lower than 1.00 is indicative of a higher likelihood of secure attachment. When considering interparental violence and insecure-resistant attachment, odds ratios indicate that psychological violence (1.076), physical violence (1.689), and the combined measure (1.190) also pointed to a higher likelihood of insecure-resistant attachment. Sexual violence, yielding an odds ratio of .797, is indicative of a lower likelihood of insecure-resistant attachment. These results are consistent with the findings from the initial
dichotomous analyses. As the number of cases falling under the insecure-avoidant category were so few, it is challenging to determine meaningful interpretation of the results.

Table 4.

*Associations Between IPV and Child-Mother Attachment at Year Three*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IPV Type</th>
<th>Attachment Classification</th>
<th>B(S.E.)</th>
<th>p*</th>
<th>e^8</th>
<th>B(S.E.)</th>
<th>p*</th>
<th>e^8</th>
<th>B(S.E.)</th>
<th>p*</th>
<th>e^8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psych</td>
<td>Secure/Insecure</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>.931</td>
<td>0.981</td>
<td>-6.81</td>
<td>.417</td>
<td>0.506</td>
<td>-0.073</td>
<td>.754</td>
<td>1.076</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(S.E.)</td>
<td>(.227)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(.839)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(.232)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Avoidant</td>
<td>-4.25</td>
<td>.428</td>
<td>0.654</td>
<td>-25.338</td>
<td>.901</td>
<td>1.354</td>
<td>-2.303</td>
<td>.310</td>
<td>1.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(S.E.)</td>
<td>(.535)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(.0)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(2.96)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resistant</td>
<td>0.303</td>
<td>0.546</td>
<td>1.354</td>
<td>-14.689</td>
<td>.417</td>
<td>1.777</td>
<td>-0.227</td>
<td>.649</td>
<td>.797</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(S.E.)</td>
<td>(.501)</td>
<td></td>
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<td>(.0)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(.499)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined</td>
<td>Secure/Insecure</td>
<td>-0.030</td>
<td>.953</td>
<td>0.970</td>
<td>-2.303</td>
<td>.310</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>.174</td>
<td>.733</td>
<td>1.190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(S.E.)</td>
<td>(.504)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(2.96)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(.511)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05.

**Relationship Stability**

Descriptive information about maternal reports of parental relationship stability at Year Five is reported in Table 5. As indicated there, the majority of mothers (77.8%) reported maintaining a romantic relationship with the focal child’s over the two-year period. Only 21.9% of mothers reported a dissolved parental relationship at Year Five.
Table 5.

Maternal Reports of Parental Relationship Stability at Year Five

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship Status</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maintained</td>
<td>916</td>
<td>78.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissolved</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>21.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1173</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The association between child-mother attachment at Year Three and parental relationship stability at Year Five was determined by conducting chi-square analyses. Results indicate that the association between the dichotomous secure/insecure attachment variable and parental relationship stability is not significant $\chi^2(2, N= 1173) = 3.557, p = .059$. A summary of the relationship between attachment status and parental relationship stability is provided in Table 6. Of those with securely attached children, 79.3% of mothers reported a maintained parental relationship compared to 20.7% reporting dissolved relationships. Of mothers who reported insecurely attached children, 73.9% of parental relationship were maintained, whereas 26.1% were dissolved. The high percentage of mothers with maintained parental relationships within both secure and insecure attached children was driven by the general high rates of relationship stability reported across the sample. Although not statistically significant, there is a trend towards mothers with securely attached children having a higher percentage of relationship stability than those with insecurely attached children. In fact, mothers reporting securely attached children at Year Three reported the highest frequency of maintained parental
relationships at Year Five across the distribution (79.3%), while mothers with insecurely attached children at Year Three reported the highest percentage of relationship dissolution at Year Five (26.1%). As child-mother attachment was not a statistically significant predictor of relationship stability, hypothesis two was not supported.

The association between interparental violence at Year Three and parental relationship stability at Year Five was determined by conducting logistic regression analyses with interparental violence as the predictor and relationship stability as the criterion. Results are summarized in Table 7. In general, interparental violence was found to be a statistically significant predictor of later relationship dissolution. Considering the different types of interparental violence incorporated in the analyses, psychological violence ($p < .027$), physical violence ($p < .009$), and combined violence ($p < .003$), were all highly related to relationship dissolution. Sexual violence was not a statistically significant predictor ($p < .156$).

As child-mother attachment did not hold statistical significance in relation to parental relationship stability, and interparental violence did hold statistical significance (excluding sexual violence), it is clear that interparental violence is a stronger predictor of parental relationship trajectories. Thus, these results indicate support for hypothesis three, in that interparental violence was a stronger predictor of later relationship dissolution than child-mother attachment.
Table 6.

*Child-Mother Attachment and Parental Relationship Stability*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attachment</th>
<th>Maintained</th>
<th>Dissolved</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Insecure</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within attachment</td>
<td>73.9%</td>
<td>26.1%</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of total</td>
<td>16.6%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secure</td>
<td>721</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>909</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within attachment</td>
<td>79.3%</td>
<td>20.7%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of total</td>
<td>61.5%</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
<td>77.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>916</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>1173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within attachment</td>
<td>78.1%</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of total</td>
<td>78.1%</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7.

**Associations Between IPV and Parental Relationship Stability**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IPV Type</th>
<th>B(S.E.)</th>
<th>p*</th>
<th>e^8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>.490</td>
<td>.027</td>
<td>1.633</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.221)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>1.428</td>
<td>.009</td>
<td>4.171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.548)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual</td>
<td>.562</td>
<td>.156</td>
<td>1.754</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.396)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>3.989</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.473)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05.

**Discussion**

The primary, and most surprising, revelation from the current study is the lack of support for the claim that fragile families really are “fragile” and vulnerable to dysfunctional familial processes. In general, the sample revealed low rates of interparental violence, high rates of secure child-mother attachment, and high rates of parental relationship stability. Though reports of psychological interparental violence were high (42.7%), reports of physical (2%) and sexual (1.7%) interparental violence were very low. As physical and sexual violence are closely related to immediate safety concerns, thus often conceptualized as the more damaging forms of abuse (Barnett, Miller-Perrin, & Perrin, 2011), these low incidence rates indicate that “fragile” mother-father dyads are not necessarily plagued by destructive or dangerous behaviors. The high
levels of parental relationship stability over the two-year period (77.8%) reveals that not only do these families experience little violence, but that they are not as susceptible to familial instability as prior research has claimed (Reichman et al., 2001). With 77.5% of children forming secure child-mother attachment, this suggests that the majority of these mother-child dyads likely engage in the optimal patterns of responsiveness and warmth (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Although prior research claims unwed families are “fragile” and face increased dysfunction, families in the current study were characterized by positive mother-father and child-mother relationships. While the present study was limited to the variables interparental violence, child-mother attachment, and parental relationship stability, these findings suggest that “fragile” families are, in fact, capable of healthy familial functioning. This revelation highlights the necessity of subscribing to a strengths-based perspective in research and practice with families, regardless of their potential susceptibility to increased risk factors. Rather than adopting a deficit perspective, future research efforts should focus on uncovering the strengths and resilience of vulnerable families.

The present study hypothesized that interparental violence would be related to insecure child-mother attachment. Given the low rates of interparental violence and high rates of secure child-mother attachment, analyses revealed that no form of interparental violence was statistically related to attachment. Though this seems to contradict a systems perspective, which emphasizes the power the mother-father subsystem holds over the child-mother subsystem (Smith & Hamon, 2012), these results are a reminder for researchers to look beyond significance values alone when disentangling familial
processes. Considering the odds ratios generated by logistic analyses, psychological, physical and combined interparental violence all pointed to an increased likelihood of insecure attachment. These findings are consistent with work by Levendosky and colleagues (2011b), who found that reports of interparental violence increased rates of insecure child-mother attachment. As psychological, physical and combined interparental violence increased insecure attachment, there are indications that violence in the parental relationship spilled over to impact the child-mother relationship (Erel & Burman, 1995), providing potential support for the spillover hypothesis as opposed to the compensatory hypothesis. Levendosky and team (2011b) further revealed that this spillover occurred due to mothers’ trauma-induced psychological dysfunction cascading into inhibiting caregiving. It may be that abused mothers in the current study experienced this same psychological damage, which then provided a pathway for violence to spill over into child-mother attachment security.

Conversely, odds ratios for sexual violence pointed to increases in secure child-mother attachment, garnering support for the compensatory theory (Levendosky et al., 2003). Greenberg et al. (1990) point out that in the context of very high interparental conflict, the mother-child relationship may be the only close relationship a mother has, which potentially leads to stronger child-mother attachment. Given this perspective, the current findings suggest that the isolation associated with sexual violence (Breiding et al., 2014) may have encouraged sexually abused mothers to deliberately engage in strategies to nurture the child-mother relationship.
Overall, the consensus on child-mother attachment security in the face of interparental violence is still mixed. With psychological, physical and combined interparental violence pointing towards increases in insecure attachment and sexual violence pointed towards increased secure attachment, this study provides limited support for both the spillover and compensatory hypotheses. Though the lack of statistical significance of this analysis limits the utility of these findings, it does provide insight to which forms of violence may be more strongly related to attachment classification. As this was the first study to consider the various types of interparental violence and the differences they may yield for child-mother attachment, these results highlight the necessity for future research to explore the implications of different forms of violence on familial functioning, especially child-mother attachment.

Stemming from a systems perspective, prior research had suggested that children and mother-child relationships play a role in the trajectories of parental relationships (e.g., Meyer, 2011 and Rhodes et al., 2010). Due to this prior literature, the present study hypothesized that secure child-mother attachment would be predictive of maintained parental relationships over the duration of two years. Though mothers reporting securely attached children also reported the highest frequency of maintained parental relationships across the distribution (79.3%), this association was not found to be statistically significant. It could be that although children are factored into maternal stay/leave decisions (Meyer, 2011; Radford & Hester, 2001), the attachment bond they hold is not a driving force behind that decision-making process. Rasool (2016) suggests that abused mothers make decisions to stay or leave an abusive relationship based on the social
expectations for mothers to protect their children: they stay when that’s safest and leave when staying becomes too dangerous. Perhaps the mothers who reported dissolved relationships were driven by concerns for the child’s safety, and the social expectation to act as their child’s protector, rather than the subconscious attachment bond. As Rasool (2016) provides support for this argument via a small, qualitative study, it would be interesting for future research to explore the social expectations of abused mothers from a quantitative perspective.

Despite child-mother attachment not relating to parental relationship trajectories, interparental violence was highly predictive of the stability of later parental relationship. Though reports of interparental violence were low overall, mothers who reported psychological violence, physical violence or combined violence were all highly likely to also report ending their abusive relationship. This finding further casts doubts on the claim that fragile families are in fact “fragile” (Reichman et al., 2001), as dissolution would be highly successful functioning in the context of interparental violence. However, sexual violence did not yield the same results. For the small number of mothers who reported sexual abuse, they were more likely to maintain the parental relationships over the course of two years. These diverging results raise the question of whether it was the experience of violence that encouraged dissolution, or if it was the consequences of the violent experiences. In general, psychological and physical violence are more commonly witnessed by children than sexual violence, which tends to be a more private form of abuse (Holden, 2003). Meyer (2010) found that mothers of children who witness violence are 3.5 times more likely to leave an abusive relationship. Perhaps
mothers who reported psychological or physical violence in the current sample also had children who were more frequently exposed to the violence, which ultimately encouraged mothers to take their children out of the dangerous home environment. Children in homes with sexual interparental violence may not have faced exposure, thus yielding different ramifications. Though interparental violence was a stronger predictor of relationship stability than child-mother attachment, this line of thinking suggests an alternative pathway through which children, and mother-child relationships, may impact parental relationship trajectories. This further highlights the need to investigate the implication of different forms of violence on familial functioning.

**Limitations**

The primary limitation of the current study was its utilization of secondary data. Analyses of research constructs were constrained by the measurement instruments used in the FFCWS data collection. In terms of interparental violence, the number of FFCWS survey items that related to abusive behaviors were very limited. Psychological violence was represented by three items, physical violence was represented by two items, and sexual violence was only represented by one item. Due to the limited number of survey items related to interparental violence, the true experiences of abuse may not have been captured, ultimately reducing the variance reported in the current sample. It may have been that more mothers had experienced interparental violence than was reported, but the items included were not comprehensive enough to generate a true measure. Future research should utilize more comprehensive measure of interparental violence, such as those suggested by the Intimate Partner Violence Surveillance: Uniform Definitions and
Recommendations Data Elements (Breiding et al., 2015), when considering its association to child-mother attachment and parental relationship stability. Similarly, measurement of child-mother attachment was collected via The Toddler Attachment Q-Sort (TAS-39), in which mothers report their child’s attachment related behavior. Due to the nature of self-reports, it could be that these scores of attachment were influenced by mothers’ social desirability biases. Future research should employ an observation-based measure of child-mother attachment, such as The Strange Situation (Ainsworth et al., 1978), in an effort to reduce the tendency for self-reports to contain such bias.

Additionally, the current study looked through the narrow lens of child-mother attachment in relation to interparental violence and parental relationship stability. There may be other conceptualizations of mother-child relationship quality that are influenced by interparental violence and predict parental relationship stability. Future research should expand beyond the narrow scope of attachment by considering other factors related to the mother-child relationship. Though the current study does present these limitations, the results and implications discussed create a pathway for fruitful future research efforts to further disentangle the complex interplay between interparental violence, child-mother relationships, and parental relationship stability.
REFERENCES
References


